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Scientific paper

Sylvia Słowińska

BOTTOM-UP CULTURAL INITIATIVES IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES – BETWEEN RETREAT AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

ABSTRACT

The goal of this text is to discuss the ways in which the creators/organizers of bottom-up cultural initiatives in local communities shape relationships with these communities and to present their involvement in the communities' affairs and problems. This is considered in the context of concepts of local education and learning in the local community. I describe five ways of shaping relations with the local community that can be located on a continuum between two poles: retreat (distance from the community) and engagement in its affairs. In the conclusion I present three models of bottom-up cultural initiatives constructed on the basis of the research findings: enclave, niche and platform initiatives. At the end I point out that all three types of bottom-up cultural initiatives provide various opportunities for learning in local communities, but it is primarily 'platforms' that create a space of local education strictly connected with the needs and problems of the local community.

Keywords: bottom-up cultural initiatives, cultural activity, local community, relationships with the local community, involvement in local affairs, local education, learning in the local community

KULTURNE POBUDE OD SPODAJ NAVZGOR V LOKALNIH SKUPNOSTIH – MED UMIKOM IN DRUŽBENIM VKLJUČEVANJEM – POVZETEK

V članku razpravljam o tem, kako ustvarjalci/organizatorji kulturnih pobud »od spodaj navzgor« v lokalnih skupnostih krojijo odnose s temi skupnostmi, ter predstavljam njihovo vključenost v dogajanje in probleme skupnosti. Področje obravnavam v okviru konteksta konceptov lokalnega izobraževanja in učenja na lokalni ravni. Pri tem opisujem pet načinov oblikovanja odnosov z lokalno skupnostjo, ki so razpeti med dvema poloma: umikom (distanco do skupnosti) in vključevanjem v lokalno dogajanje. V sklepu predstavljam tri modele kulturnih pobud od spodaj navzgor, oblikovanih na podlagi rezultatov raziskave: modele enklavne, nišne in platformne pobude. Na koncu poudarjam, da vse tri vrste kulturnih pobud od spodaj navzgor ponujajo raznolike priložnosti za učenje v lokalnih skupnostih, primarno pa so »platforme« tiste, ki ustvarjajo prostor za lokalno izobraževanje, ki je tesno povezano s potrebami in problemi lokalne skupnosti.

Ključne besede: kulturne pobude od spodaj navzgor, kulturna dejavnost, lokalna skupnost, odnosi z lokalno skupnostjo, vključenost v lokalno dogajanje, lokalno izobraževanje, učenje v lokalni skupnosti

Sylvia Słowińska, PhD, University of Zielona Góra, s.slowinska@ips.uz.zgora.pl

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of bottom-up cultural initiatives seems especially interesting in times of increasing social non-commitment, withdrawal into the private sphere and the weakening of the idea of citizenship (see Bauman, 2001; Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, and Tipton, 1996; Putnam, 2001). In Poland, ever since the transformation of the political system, the arduous building of a civic society is constantly being carried out. Over 25 years after the collapse of the socialist system, researchers still describe the weakness and fragility of civil society and emphasize the need for extensive education to develop civic attitudes (Mocek, 2014; Wódz, 2005). Numerous studies reveal the limited involvement of Poles in activities for supra-individual purposes, for volunteering and social activities (Czapiński, 2015; Drozdowski, 2008; Pazderski and Walczak, 2014; Niedźwiedzki, 2005). Dariusz Niedźwiedzki (2005) explains that Polish society is in a liminal state: in a form of crisis, a phase of cultural change in which there are no stable, universally accepted and applied values, norms and principles of collective life, because the values, norms and patterns of the old and new order apply at the same time (p. 246). This state of suspension between the old and the new order manifests itself in the fact that people are not interested in public affairs, that the concentration on particular interests prevails, and that the creation of clientistic systems replaces political equality. Limiting trust, solidarity and loyalty to small primary, family, and friendship groups restricts the life of the community. Poles continue to engage in social activities to a small extent within the framework of civil society structures, for example, in non-governmental organizations (Niedźwiedzki, 2005, pp. 248-249). The changes will be slow and require patience as this concerns the formation of stable pro-social attitudes (Wódz, 2005).

A lack of commitment and withdrawal into privacy prevailing in Polish society today are phenomena that heavily occupy researchers and commentators on social life. The practices of engagement are, however, also noteworthy, which is why my research focuses on bottom-up cultural initiatives. These are activities outside the framework of traditional institutions; they are non-commercial, planned, independent of top-down inspiration and supervision, and are undertaken by people who are voluntarily associating in the name of matters important to them. Against the background of the withdrawal into privacy, it seems worth investigating the activities of people who are involved, people who 'go against the flow' and selflessly make an effort to organize cultural events on their own, engage actively and creatively in socio-cultural life in their environment, and encourage others to do so as well. In the text that follows, I would like to discuss some findings of my research on bottom-up cultural initiatives. The goal of the study was to understand this kind of activity, which required focusing on the subjective interpretations of social actors – on the meanings people who take action assign to their experiences –, in this case, the creators/organizers of such initiatives (Eberle, 1984; Hitzler and Eberle, 2000; Schütz, 1971; 1974; Schütz and Luckmann, 2003). Reconstructing the meanings of bottom-up initiatives also included questions about who their creators/organizers are and how they perceive their role, what actions they take and how

they work (i.e. what ways they develop for dealing with the various tasks involved in carrying out the initiatives).

From the perspective of adult education, these initiatives create a space of informal and non-formal education for the people participating in them. Social actors who run them play the role of leaders, originators, animators of cultural activity as well as educators and creators or initiators of learning situations. Each initiative is carried out in a specific local community (related to the specific territory of a village, town, or city district) by the people living there and can therefore be considered from the perspective of education in the local community and local education. As Ewa Kurantowicz (2008a) explains, local education creates a space for excluded voices (p. 26). It occurs in many variants but always focuses on the problems and needs of the community, goes beyond institutional education, takes place mainly in informal and local contexts, is focused on the implementation of a locally and socially involved goal, empowers, and introduces a difference (Kurantowicz 2008a, pp. 27-28).

This topic is the central focus of this article. My aim is to answer the following question: How do the creators/organizers of cultural initiatives shape relationships with the local community? As an adult education researcher, I was also interested in whether the organizers of the initiatives create spaces for local education. This is related to the questions of whether initiatives are involved in the affairs of the local community and which affairs they engage in.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATION OF THE RESEARCH

The studies were embedded in the interpretative approach; their philosophical foundation was the social phenomenology of Alfred Schütz because it is phenomenology that takes an interest in how people understand the world and what meanings they ascribe to phenomena, i.e. how and as what they appear in their experience. My research was characterised by the following views: that a researcher is confronted with a reality that is imbued with sense by the social actors acting in it, and that understanding the actions of people requires a view of the world through their eyes, focusing on subjective interpretations rooted in their lifeworld. Using methodological procedures, a researcher reconstructs these subjective meanings and, based on them, creates typologies and scientific models, the so-called second-degree constructs (Schütz and Luckmann, 2003; Schütz, 2006; 2008). According to Alfred Schütz's viewpoint, which I adopt, the actions of the social actors included in the study are rooted in their lifeworld, and it is through them that the organizers/implementers of the initiatives reveal how they understand reality, how they experience it, and what is relevant to them according to their individual systems of relevance. They assign meaning to initiatives by determining the expected results of actions, i.e. 'motives in order to', and by assigning them 'motives because', i.e. social and biographical conditioning, in the acts of reflection. Therefore, in my search for the meanings of grass-roots cultural initiatives, I concentrated on reconstructing these motives of action.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RESEARCHED INITIATIVES AND THEIR CREATORS/ORGANIZERS

The research on bottom-up cultural initiatives was carried out in 2012 in the Lubuskie province, which is located in western Poland. Data was collected with the use of qualitative tools – through in-depth interviews and observations of activities. The data derives from 16 bottom-up cultural initiatives undertaken by various social actors: individuals (5), formalized groups – associations (9), and non-formalized groups (2). Eight initiatives were carried out in villages, three in small towns (with populations under 20,000), one in a medium-sized city (with a population between 20,000 and 100,000 inhabitants) and four in small towns with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants.

Interviews were conducted with 32 people working at the heart of these initiatives, that is, the people most engaged in them: the ones participating in creating ideas, planning, decision-making and realization. Among the interviewed creators/organizers of initiatives were 9 women and 23 men, between the ages of 20 and 80; 21 respondents had achieved higher levels of education, 6 people had completed secondary-level education, 1 person had basic vocational education, and 4 organizers were students. In addition, 9 of them worked professionally in the area of culture.

Table 1: Fields and profile of initiatives

Range of fields/ Profile of initiative	Field of culture/topic of initiative
one cultural field/ profiled	1) stage improvisation 2) comedy 3) film
one main cultural field plus additional fields/profiled	4) arts (plus other fields, e.g. cultural heritage) 5) arts, music (plus other fields, e.g. culinary, handicraft) 6) modern art (plus other fields, e.g. theatre, music)
many cultural fields/ profiled	7) Lemko culture 8) Jewish culture 9) history of the region, local culture, Polish-German relations 10) hip-hop culture
many cultural fields/ partly profiled	11) social relations, art, music, history, local cultural heritage; entertainment 12) social relations, music, local cultural heritage 13) regionalism, cultural heritage, history, photography, visual arts, music 14) forest, sculpture, music, work, sports, entertainment
many cultural fields/ not profiled	15) culinary, fun, music, singing, dancing 16) social relations, religion, poetry, music, theatre, recreation

Source: own

The researched initiatives involve various fields of culture and various topics. First, three initiatives are focused on one cultural field (e.g. film), so they are thematically profiled. Second, the next three initiatives are focused on one main cultural field too but are sometimes linked to different fields (for a specific project). Third, four initiatives are related to many fields of culture and thematically profiled (specializing in specific issues). Fourth, the next four initiatives are related to many fields of culture but only partly thematically profiled (some activities are profiled, others not). And finally, two initiatives are connected with many fields of culture and are not profiled thematically.

WAYS OF SHAPING RELATIONS WITH THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

The ways in which the creators/organizers of initiatives shape relationships with the local community are linked to their understanding of the initiatives. Three types of understanding have been reconstructed in this research:

- A. initiative as a space of self-realization (mostly focused on the chosen cultural field, mainly an artistic one);
- B. initiative as a space of self-fulfilment that includes a component of social engagement (but engagement has a limited scope);
- C. initiative as a space of socially engaged cultural activity.

Each initiative is implemented in a particular local community; however, they are open to the local community and local issues in varying degrees. Based on data analysis I identified five ways of shaping relations with the local community. These differ according to how the local community is understood (its role, its position relative to the initiative) and in the planned results (what the organizers want to achieve). The reconstructed ways of shaping relationships with the local community are:

- opening up to the community,
- familiarizing the community with the initiatives and winning it over
- cooperation with the community,
- staying aloof,
- going against the grain.

Opening up to the community

The first way of shaping relationships with the community can be illustrated by the words of an interviewed creator/organizer of an initiative as:

[...] going beyond institutions and reaching out to a greater number of people.

The local community is understood here as the addressee of a specific offer of cultural activity, its recipient, but not as a co-creator. It is important for this approach to avoid financial, competence and spatial barriers to the use of this offer. The creators/organizers carry out initiatives in an open, public space, choosing mainly forms such as

concerts, festivals, performances, shows, workshops and more. Thus, the offers of cultural activity are for community members (for everyone) and they are easily accessible. Using this way of shaping relationships with the community, their creators/organizers want to achieve the increased interest in the subject matter or cultural field of the initiative as well as greater cultural activity in the community. They create a space for informal learning through cultural activity, in which locals develop the competences of the recipient of a cultural event, enabling them to move around in the world of culture and use its products.

Familiarizing the community with the initiatives and winning it over

One of the respondents describes this approach as follows:

[...] just like with the Little Prince and the fox [...] [,] this is a form of taming, familiarizing people with a certain sphere of cultural life.

The community is also seen here as the addressee of the action and its recipient, but primarily as the subject of educational influence. It is about familiarizing people with certain forms of cultural activity, certain phenomena or problems, and is about provoking changes in their thinking patterns and actions. This way of shaping relationships is primarily chosen when initiatives are new in an environment or when they address issues in a difficult context. The idea is to gradually introduce locals to the new activities, to accustom people to what is unknown, and can thus cause anxiety or simply disturb the current routine. The planned results attributed to this way of shaping relationships are community acceptance for the initiative and its ideas, rooting it within community life and the gradual involvement of people in action.

Cooperation with the community

This way of acting is illustrated by the voice of one initiative creator/organizer:

[...] when it comes to festivals, the entire village is included.

Both the above-presented ways of forming relationships with the community consist of work *for* the community – the third is about work *with* the community (Lucio-Villegas & Fragoso, 2016). It is based on the perception of the community as a co-creator of the initiative. This cooperation can range from involving individuals and community representatives, to specific tasks, to involving the whole community in the action.

This way of working is based on the participation of community members and on giving them a voice, a key feature of community education. It should enhance the potential of the community and strengthen the bonds between its members and their engagement in joint affairs as well as their identification with the initiative. It creates opportunities for the community members to practice democracy and to learn citizenship.

Staying aloof

One respondent expresses this approach thus:

[...] we have not yet dealt with an open group, we do not post posters, 'Everybody come here, please!'

The first three ways of shaping relationships with the local community are conciliatory approaches that do not take into account tensions or divisions within communities and avoid conflicts. In addition, they show that the initiative needs the community. The situation is different in the case of 'staying aloof'. Here, the creators/organizers of initiatives reduce the local community to the background of the activities. They tend to retreat into a niche instead of openly approaching the community with their activities. They address initiatives to a narrow circle of interested people who have similar passions and do not try to open up the initiative to the whole community. This is connected with the subject matter of the initiative, which may in some cases generate negative reactions, but above all, it is oriented inward (to the realization of one's own interests) and not outward (in order to change something in the environment). According to Ian Martin and Mae Shaw, in this case, the community is a frame of activity (cited in Kurantowicz, 2008a, p. 24). Within a community understood in such a way, there are various learning groups gathered around specific topics and interests (Kurantowicz, 2008b, p. 58). The organizers of initiatives create opportunities for the formation of such learning groups.

Going against the grain

One interviewee describes this way of acting as follows:

I just do it, whether you like it or not.

Rob Evans, Ewa Kurantowicz and Emilio Lucio-Villegas claim that "Community is a place where conflict and confrontation are the usual thing" (2016, p. 9). Such a view is revealed in this way of shaping relations with the community. 'Going against the grain' is an uncompromising approach and includes a risk of conflict with the community. The latter is seen here as a witness of action, indifferent or critical, not always accepting and understanding the idea of the initiative. Consequently, the organizers assume that the community is also a subject of educational influence. The principle of this mode of action is not to be discouraged by the opinions articulated by the community representatives and perform tasks perceived as important (often crucial in local and supra-local contexts). Despite resistance, criticism, dislike or lack of interest in the community (or its parts), the actors are trying to 'go forward', 'do their thing'. The key here is to believe that specific issues need to be tackled and resolved regardless of the response of the community. At the same time, they assume that their persistent efforts will eventually change the community's attitude. This mode of action is usually chosen by people who have a strong position in the community and who are active in their environment. Importantly, they never use this way exclusively.

Table 2: The ways of shaping relationships with the local community – juxtaposition

The way of shaping relationships with the local community	Understanding the local community	The main feature	Planned results
Opening up to the community	recipient, audience	activities in open public spaces, 'no barriers'	interest in the subject/ cultural phenomenon/ cultural field, greater cultural activity of the community
Familiarizing the community with the initiatives...	recipient, subject of educational influence	gradual acquaintance with the initiative/new activities	acceptance for the initiative, local participation
Cooperation with the community	co-creator	involving community members, participation	identification with the initiative, greater involvement in community issues, progress of the initiative
Staying aloof	background	retreat, acting in a secure niche	security, focus on individual goals
Going against the grain	indifferent or critical witness, subject of (educational) influence	acting despite the lack of community support	change in the views and attitudes of the locals

Source: own

The creators/organizers of initiatives combine different ways of shaping relationships with the local community. Their choice is related to their understanding of the initiatives. The actors representing the first way of understanding initiatives (A) are guided mainly by individual needs. They create for themselves and people with similar interests a space of self-fulfilment, unengaged in daily affairs, social problems or local needs. That is why they use a rather narrow spectrum of ways of shaping relationships with the local community. They primarily understand the locals as consumers (the audience) of the cultural activity offered. By implementing these initiatives, the organizers create situations for the informal learning of locals, enable the formation of learning groups in the local community but they do not, in fact, constitute a space for local education related to the problems and everyday life of the community. The situation is different in the case of the next two approaches. The broadest range of ways of shaping relations with the community is used by the actors for whom cultural initiatives are a space of social engagement (C). Their starting point is not the self, not their needs and aspirations, but specific situations in the social world, experienced as inappropriate and requiring intervention. Their actions are complex and require different treatment of the community, which in turn has different roles, but most importantly, it becomes a contributor, cooperator and participates in the initiative.

Table 3: Ways of shaping relations with the local community and understanding initiatives

Ways of shaping relations with the local community	Initiatives															
	A					B		C								
	1	2	3	6	13	8	10	4	5	7	9	11	12	14	15	16
Opening up to the community	+	+	+	+			+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Familiarizing the community...				+			+		+	+	+	+		+		+
Cooperation with the community		+	+					+	+		+	+	+	+	+	+
Staying aloof					+	+										
Going against the grain											+			+		+

A – initiatives as a space of self-realization

B – initiatives as a space of self-realization including a component of social engagement

C – initiatives as a space of a socially engaged cultural activity

Source: own

INITIATIVES IN RELATION TO LOCAL COMMUNITY ISSUES/AREAS OF ENGAGEMENT

The ways of shaping relations with the local community can be located on the continuum between two poles: retreat (distance from the community and its needs) and engagement in the affairs of the local community (in some cases related to wider supra-local contemporary challenges).

Figure 1: Bottom-up initiatives between retreat and engagement



There are two ways in which the organizers of initiatives involved in the affairs of the local community perceive the things they engage in. First, they *act locally and think locally* (Idzikowski, 2011). They treat these issues as specific phenomena related to the life of this particular community, which bind them to the local context. Their involvement deals with issues such as:

- weak involvement of the inhabitants in the life of the community;
- disturbed local relationships (conflicts, lack of community spirit, disintegration);
- disappearance of local traditions;
- exclusion of the inhabitants of a small village;
- limited opportunities for the development and success of local artists–beginners.

Secondly, the initiative organizers/creators *operate locally, but think locally and supra-locally*. They engage with issues that concern a given community, but they perceive it in a broader perspective, as a supra-local phenomenon. Their initiatives deal with problems such as:

- weak social/cultural activity;
- the threat of the disappearance of minority culture (Lemko culture);
- threats to the development of children and adolescents (captivating media influence, exclusion of children from rural areas);
- intolerance, stereotypes and prejudices (against hip hop subculture, Jewish culture, Lemko culture, Germans);
- difficulties in Polish-German reconciliation;
- threat of social exclusion (villagers);
- neglect, degradation, obliteration of cultural heritage.

The organizers of these initiatives, therefore, not only create a learning space in the local community, but above all initiate local education involved in the affairs and needs of the community.

IN CONCLUSION: MODELS OF BOTTOM-UP CULTURAL INITIATIVES IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Based on the results of the study, I have constructed three models of bottom-up cultural initiatives. The following criteria of division have been used:

- the scope of openness of the initiative to the local community;
- the way the actors think about the cultural activities;
- the goals of the activities and their relation to the social context.

Thus, *enclave initiatives* create a space that is separated from the social environment (Gołdyka and Machaj, 2007; Gołdyka, 2009). They constitute an isolated world of cultural activity for a limited group of people. The initiatives are created to meet their own needs and aspirations. Therefore, initiatives of this kind are exclusive and closed. Cultural activity is understood rather narrowly: it focuses on a specific, selected field of culture, the fascination with which connects and unites the creators/organizers of the initiative.

‘Enclave initiatives’ constitute a space for cultural activity focused on individual goals (primarily self-realization) and are not involved in the surrounding social reality and in the affairs of the local community, whose members are the creators/organizers of the initiative. They provide an informal and non-formal learning space and build learning groups in which people gather based on specific interests. They strengthen the educational potential of the local community but only to a limited extent because they do not cooperate with other entities in the local environment and the range of their impact is small.

Niche initiatives also build a separated space of cultural activity, but unlike ‘the enclaves’, they are not fully enclosed and hermetic. First, they provide opportunities for cultural activity for the narrower (their own) group of creators/organizers and people close to them (internal offer, not addressed to the outside); second, there is also a proposal for ‘non-initiative’ people, community representatives, primarily treated as audience. There is also greater opportunity (though not unlimited) of entering the niche, which means joining the initiative group. As in the case of ‘enclave initiatives’, cultural activity is narrowly understood and tied primarily to the goal of individual self-realization. Cultural activity is not a way to get involved in social affairs, it is not an instrument for making changes outside the niche. Its semi-open nature makes it possible for certain issues to penetrate it and the organizers/creators of the initiative expand their activities ad hoc by joining in specific actions in the community.

Finally, *platform initiatives* set up a certain space of cultural activity that is not enclosed away from the life of the local community but is a platform of broad engagement. ‘Platform initiatives’ are an example of activities open to collaboration and community participation. A broad understanding of cultural activity means linking it to the social context. Cultural activity, therefore, does not constitute a separate reality isolated from the community but is a way of integrating into its life and changing it. Such bottom-up initiatives are an expression of concern for common issues, an expression of commitment and responsibility for issues of universal character.

All three types of bottom-up cultural initiatives create various opportunities for learning in local communities, but it is primarily ‘platforms’ that construct a space of local education strictly connected with the real life of the community. In this case, organizers think collectively and teach community members collective thinking; they encourage people to participate in local community life; they provide new learning opportunities in places and areas where there is a gap, that is, where there is nothing on offer or it is poor; they raise topics not taken on by other entities, for example, cultural and educational institutions existing in their environment. They create opportunities for social interaction that strengthens local bonds and is crucial for the development of the local community. These kinds of initiatives, as Kurantowicz (2007) has pointed out, are a way to build and develop the educational potential of the local community (p.149).

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